

Fast, Accurate Fires in the Close Fight

by Lieutenant Colonel David L. Anderson

The lead platoon of the infantry company conducting a search and attack mission moves through the restricted terrain of Cortina. It makes contact with an opposing force (OPFOR) element of two to five soldiers.

The OPFOR immediately lays down a base of fire, beginning its battle drill for actions-on-contact. The element falls back and begins to maneuver to the flank of the infantry company. It then inflicts as many casualties from the flank as possible. The results: seven infantrymen casualties for every OPFOR casualty.

The infantry company begins to evacuate its casualties and reorganizes to continue the mission of finding and defeating the OPFOR operating in the company's zone. At no time does the platoon forward observer (FO) or company fire support officer (FSO) employ indirect fire support to fix or finish the enemy.

This scenario occurs again and again during the search and attack missions conducted at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC), Fort Polk, Louisiana. The reason? Fire supporters and their maneuver counterparts don't know how to use danger-close fires in the chaos of initial contact. This observation implies that light infantry units are not well-trained in fighting with fires in restricted terrain.

No training center in the Army focuses more on light infantry operations in re-

stricted terrain fighting a well-trained, disciplined OPFOR. The JRTC's "graduate-level" training requires tremendous actions and well-trained small units to execute the missions successfully. Although our light infantry units are among the finest in the world, they still need to drill their actions-on-contact to make the most of their combat power in the heat of contact.

This article describes fighting with fires techniques and battle drills proven effective in the close fight at the JRTC. The

techniques require detailed planning, rehearsed battle drills and violent and rapid execution—all practiced at home station in combined arms training.

Detailed Planning. To fight with fires, our infantry company commanders, platoon leaders, company FSOs and platoon FOs must first plan to use indirect fires during search and attack missions. As fire supporters, you plan priority targets along the direction of attack on likely enemy ambush sites and templated enemy positions and then pre-clear those priority targets, if possible.

The purpose of each priority target is to isolate or fix the OPFOR during contact. Then you allocate a weapon system, such as an artillery battery or mortar platoon, to provide immediate, responsive fire support to the maneuver unit as it moves to contact. Based on the factors of mission, enemy, terrain, troops and time available (METT-T), you consider placing a Field Artillery platoon or battery in direct support (DS) to a maneuver unit conducting search and attack operations.

As the company moves along the route without making contact with the enemy, you cancel a priority target and establish the next target as priority; the designated fire unit lays on the new target. The trigger for canceling one priority target and establishing the next target is based on the minimum safe distance for the weapon system designated to fire the priority target (see the figure).

You coordinate the route of march with any friendly units operating in the company zone. If the company comes into contact with the OPFOR, the company commander can execute his actions-on-contact battle drill, including using indirect fires. Detailed planning and coordination ensures responsive fire support is available.

Fire Support Movement Techniques. You navigate by using a map or precision lightweight global positioning system (GPS) receiver (PLGR) and knowing the exact location of the maneuver element. You enter priority targets as "way points" in the PLGR. This helps the FSO establish the relationship between the observer's location and the location of the next priority target at all times.

Whenever possible, you fire marking rounds (smoke or high-explosive munitions) on the priority target beyond the minimum safe distance for the weapon system to show the platoon leader exactly where the next pre-planned target is on the ground.



Weapon	Range (Meters) Observer-Adjusted Delivery Technique										
	1,000	2,000	4,000	6,000	8,000	10,000	12,000	14,000	16,000	18,000	20,000
60-mm Mortar	330	330									
81-mm Mortar	330	330	322								
4.2-Inch Mortar		350	360								
105-mm Howitzer			340	340	350	360					
155-mm Howitzer			430	440	450	460	470	530	600	680	
8-Inch Howitzer			450	450	470	500	510	520	520	600	610

Minimum Safe Distances by Weapon System [From FM 6-141-1 Field Artillery Target Analysis and Weapons Employment: Nonnuclear (U)].

You cancel the old priority target and establish the new one as the maneuver element moves. This occurs as the lead element of the unit moves within the minimum safe distance of the weapon system being used. You update the battalion fire support element (FSE) and firing unit fire direction center (FDC) every 500 meters of movement or every 30 minutes. This constant position update allows the FSE and FDC to accurately battle track and anticipate executing the priority target with speed and accuracy.

Actions-on-Contact. Company commanders/platoon leaders at the JRTC routinely demonstrate that they don't know how to fight with fires during the actions-on-contact battle drill. When maneuver elements make contact with the OPFOR, the commander/platoon leader usually take one of two actions. The element either immediately returns fire and chases the enemy or it takes no action and stays in its position. By chasing the enemy, the element gives him the advantage. The enemy can allow part of the element to pass and then conduct a hasty ambush. If the element takes no action, the enemy, again, has the advantage and can maneuver against the stalled element and bring direct and (if time permits) indirect fires onto it. In both scenarios, the enemy gains the initiative and can inflict casualties.

Too often, friendly indirect fires are never considered, much less employed, in the fight. If the commander/platoon leader controls his element, develops the situation and employs the assets available to him, then he can destroy the enemy while protecting his force.

To successfully defeat the enemy when in contact, the FSO/FO takes cover, immediately fires the priority target and gets a sheaf on the ground. You show the sheaf to the company commander/platoon leader and ask whether he wants to kill the enemy with indirect fire *or* with maneuver and direct fire *or* with a combination of both.

At this point, the commander/leader must exercise "combat patience." Combat patience is his controlling the element to allow the tactical situation to develop and then use the combat power available to him.

Once the commander/leader has decided how he'll defeat the enemy, you adjust the sheaf with bold corrections to kill the moving enemy or you adjust the sheaf to creep the fires onto a position immediately behind the enemy to isolate, fix or suppress him, facilitating the commander's attack by direct fire and maneuver.

The platoon FO must physically accompany the platoon leader as he fights the battle. He must be prepared to shift the fires as directed (usually farther away from the platoon, based on the direction of attack). The FO keeps the steel falling by using the command, "Repeat, [for example] right 60, add 100, repeat." The platoon FO commands, "End of mission" when the platoon leader directs. He immediately establishes another priority target and fires it.

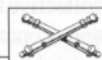
You repeat this battle drill any time your unit makes contact with the enemy.

Home-Station Training. The key to winning the close fight is home-station combined arms training. The training can be as simple as the platoon leader and FO's walking a situational training exercise (STX) lane or as complex as resources and imagination allow. Critical for training is the relationship between the company commander/platoon leader and his FSO/FO.

Units can train this battle drill at home station by using two or three OPFOR soldiers hidden in heavily vegetated terrain to attack a platoon conducting a movement-to-contact. Fire coordination exercises (FCXs) must involve the FDCs, live FM radio transmissions and organic equipment. One fire marker moving down the lane with a PLGR and an artillery simulator while monitoring the fire net greatly enhances the battle drill training.

The key is to get fast, accurate fires on the ground immediately upon contact while coaching maneuver leaders to control their units, develop the situation and employ fire support assets to fix and finish the enemy force. After the FCX, units should train the battle drill using live artillery or mortars in a "walking shoot" or combined arms live-fire exercise (CALFEX).

Conclusion. During the past 18 months, units at the JRTC have clearly established that this action-on-contact battle drill is the key to success in the close fight. While the commander is responsible for fighting with fires, it's a combined arms training issue. Fire supporters must train not only their fire support teams (FISTs), but also advise the supported maneuver leaders on the use of indirect fires upon contact with the enemy. Units that can plan for the search and attack mission, execute good movement techniques, have developed and rehearsed a good actions-on-contact battle drill and have trained these tasks at home station can provide fast, accurate fires in the close fight.



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